

Critical Friends

By providing structures for effective feedback and strong support, Critical Friends Groups help teachers improve instruction and student learning.

Deborah Bambino

On Monday mornings, my students used to count on my trying out some new strategy that I had picked up at a teacher workshop the previous Saturday morning. Like Mary Poppins with her carpetbag of tricks, I often had a new warm-up or lesson at the start of each week. I spent part of many weekends at workshops in search of the perfect teaching technique that would motivate the unmotivated and awaken the curiosity of even my coolest-of-the-cool middle school students.



At C. W. Henry Elementary School in Philadelphia, a Critical Friends Group reflects on data collected during building walkthroughs to examine progress on the school's "Student as Worker, Teacher as Coach" initiative.

I don't regret the time that I spent in those sessions. I picked up a repertoire of activities and deepened my own curiosity about learning. What I regret is that my quest for the curricular cure-all was solitary and unconnected with my colleagues at school.

After eight years of this whirlwind, I signed up for something different—not

a recipe-for-success workshop, but a coaches' training program for building collaboration and reflection among colleagues—a Critical Friends Group. Organized by the National School Reform Faculty, which is coordinated by the Harmony School Education Center in Bloomington, Indiana, Critical Friends Groups help people involved with schools to work collaboratively in democratic, reflective communities.

The training focused on building the trust needed to engage in direct, honest, and productive conversations with colleagues about the complex art of

teaching. Unwilling to blame the students' abilities or home environments for a lack of school success, we learned several protocols for collectively examining and discussing how to improve both the students' work and the teachers' approach. My initial training lasted just a week, but the lessons have changed my life.

The Critical Friends Group process acknowledges the complexity of teaching and provides structures for teachers to improve their teaching by giving and receiving feedback. Working together to improve the day-to-day learning of all students is crucial to the success of Critical Friends Groups.

When the members of our training group returned to our schools, we joined colleagues in forming Critical Friends Groups, each group with up to a dozen educators who were willing to meet monthly to examine both student work and the teacher work that prompted it.

For me, this process meant looking more deeply at both my assignments and my students' responses to them.

Photo by Evelyn Bock

I could no longer blame the weather, the full moon, or my students' hormones when a lesson failed to produce its intended results. Instead, I took the work to my Critical Friends Group and asked my colleagues what they saw, what they questioned, and, most important, what they saw missing in my teaching approach.

After sharing my work with my Critical Friends Group colleagues, I realized that I could share these feedback protocols with my students. Who better, if I really wanted to hear why a lesson wasn't working? Using my Critical Friends Group experience, I started designing rubrics and assignments with my students, watching as their motivation and grasp of the material grew.

Critical Friends Groups have been the catalyst for changes in the teaching, learning, culture, and climate of learning communities in a variety of schools. Here are three examples.

Critical Friends Give Feedback

The Felix Varela Senior High School in Miami, Florida, is two years old. In 2000–2001, it had only 9th and 10th grades, and it added 11th grade in September of 2001; the school now has more than 3,000 students. The 145 faculty members, 11 of whom are trained coaches, all participate in Critical Friends Groups and use collaborative feedback processes to improve their teaching.

A science teacher, for example, had given her students the opportunity to design Earth Science pop-up books in lieu of a midterm examination. She had been pleased by the students' enthusiasm for the assignment and the considerable amount of time they spent on writing their books. The results, however, did not exhibit the academic rigor that the teacher had hoped for.

She was considering a return to her former practice of using only paper-and-pencil tests, but the students' enthusiasm for this alternative assignment kept eating at her resolve. She decided to present the assignment, her rubric, and her students' work to her Critical Friends Group.

The work involves friends who share a mission, offer strong support, and nurture a community of learners.

Using the Critical Friends "tuning protocol," the group of teachers from various disciplines examined the assignment and the students' work. They asked questions and made observations, while the presenting teacher sat outside the group and took copious notes. At the end of the session, the science teacher decided that she would improve the assignment rather than abandon it. A language arts specialist had helped her see the steps that she had skipped in explaining the purpose of the assignment and providing instructions. For example, students needed explicit information about the difference between summarizing and plagiarizing source materials, guidance that she would now be certain to provide.

Critical Friends Collaborate

At the Manual Education Complex in Denver, Colorado, all 70 teachers work in Critical Friends Groups. Through their collaborative efforts, they have designed a two-stage portfolio assessment, one at the end of 10th grade and another at the end of 12th grade.

In the Rites of Passage portfolio, students at the end of 10th grade make an oral presentation of their written

work from all core areas, including a research paper, a persuasive essay, a lab report, a math problem of the week, a résumé, and more. Accompanying each artifact is the student's written reflection on why the student selected it for inclusion in the portfolio. A panel of teachers and a community representa-

tive then evaluate both the oral presentation and the portfolio.

The Graduation by Exhibition presentation at the end of 12th grade is similar, but it also includes a student representative on the evaluation panel. Critical Friends coach Santo Nicotera points out that if teachers had not had the experience of working together in their Critical Friends Groups, this ambitious and worthwhile assessment process would probably never have begun.

In September of 2001, Manual became three smaller autonomous high schools, each with around 330 students. The collaborative community that developed in the Critical Friends Group process has provided invaluable support for this transition. In fact, the Critical Friends Groups meet on 14 early dismissal days during the year for more than two hours to plan ways to deal with the inevitable bumps in the road that occur during any restructuring initiative.

Critical Friends Find New Solutions

At C. W. Henry Elementary School in the West Mount Airy section of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, principal

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and Critical Friends Group coach Carol Nejman encourages teachers to submit lesson planning response journals instead of the traditional plan books. She also uses feedback protocols to foster collaboration and to help staff brainstorm innovative solutions to problems.

For example, one Critical Friends Group used a modified "consultancy" protocol to provide feedback to a teacher who wanted help with a student's misbehavior. Through use of the protocol and collaborative conversation, the teachers moved beyond labeling the student with real or assumed deficits and explored the student's problem behaviors from the student's point of view.

As the presenting teacher took notes, her colleagues wondered aloud whether she might have been implementing too many strategies at one time instead of allowing time for one intervention to become established before introducing another into the mix. If too many things were going on at the same time, did this student understand the rewards of positive behaviors? Others suggested that the misbehavior might be a reflection of the student's boredom and need for more challenging work. Another participant wondered whether the teacher might be concerned more about the student's impact on others than about the student's misbehavior—a question that helped the presenting teacher refocus her attention on the cause of the student's misbehavior

instead of on its disruptive effects. The feedback session helped the presenting teacher find more effective ways to assist the student, including involving the parents more closely with the student's situation.

At the end of the session, the teachers all spoke about how the collaborative protocol process could prevent the long-term negative effects of premature labeling on students' futures.

Critical Friends Create Community

These examples offer just a glimpse of what is possible when we establish reflective learning communities in our schools. The structure and format of Critical Friends Groups create opportunities for colleagues to challenge their own practice as well as that of their peers. The work is *critical* because it challenges educators to improve their teaching practice and to bring about the changes that schools need, but the process is neither negative nor threatening. The work involves *friends* who share a mission, offer strong support, and nurture a community of learners. ■

Author's note: For more information about Critical Friends Groups and the National School Reform Faculty, visit www.nsrffharmony.org or e-mail nsrff@harmony.pvt.k12.in.us.

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